

The Bounty Hunter by Ruth Chevion

My mother had eluded the Gestapo twice. The first time she was interrogated under glaring lights for several hours by three Gestapo agents, but she convinced them she was not Jewish, so they let her go. The second time was at the Post Office where she worked. She distracted the co-worker who had been tasked by the Gestapo to detain her, and she ran away just in the nick of time.

The story I'm about to tell you was the third time she was almost caught. This time it was not the Gestapo. It was a bounty hunter.

Aunt Fela had gone to fetch my mother from a short-term hiding place. Fela had arranged a new ID for my mother, but it needed a fingerprint. They were going back to Krakow by train. So, the two women went into the ladies' room, and did the fingerprint there with an ink pad that Fela had brought along. The result was a bit messy, but good enough, and they boarded the train. They didn't sit together, but they were in the same car.

Before long, a Polish man boarded the train. Walking slowly down the aisle, he peered at each passenger, until he stopped at my mother. Jew, he stated, pointing. Show me your papers. No, she said. Go away. But he grabbed her arm and pulled her off the train. Nobody intervened.

There were many bounty hunters in Poland. My Dad encountered them too. It could be a cottage business, bringing in a little income. The Gestapo gave financial rewards for Jews that were brought in. At the very least, they always gave a bottle of vodka. It was well known.

But the bounty hunter who took my mother off the train did not immediately take her to the Gestapo. First, he took my mother to his house. There, his wife and two daughters took my mother's clothes apart looking for gold or money. They opened her hems. They undid the soles of her shoes. They took apart her suitcase.

Finding nothing, they let her get dressed, and the man walked with her back to town, ostensibly to turn her over to the Gestapo. When they reached the Gestapo building, my mother made no move to resist. On the contrary, resigned to her fate, she set her suitcase down on the steps.

"How old are you," the bounty hunter asked.

"Had I not met you sir," she replied, "I would be nineteen next month."

"Oh hell," he said, "let someone else have you on his conscience." "*Niech ktosh inny cze ma na sumiene*," in Polish. And he let her go.

When my mother told this story, she always described the thing about how she put her suitcase down. It was as though everything she was feeling was described by that physical gesture. Part of her was exhausted. Her mother and her brother had been taken. She was in grief. Another part of her was realistic. No way to run. No place to hide. All the efforts come to an end. At the same time, it's clear she doesn't want to be manhandled. She may be headed to her death, but she is still her own person.

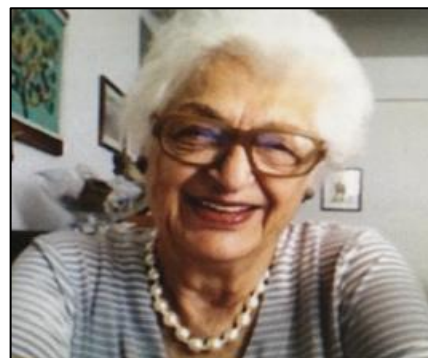
But what about the bounty hunter? What was he feeling when he let her go? His intentions had been bad. He had planned to rob the girl and then collect a bounty from the Gestapo for her as well. He had fished out a good prize. What made him give it up? I have to take him at his word. It was his conscience. Not only did he have a conscience, but he said the word for it out loud - *sumienie* (soo-myeh-nyeh) in Polish.

I hope he didn't kick himself on the way home. I hope he allowed himself to feel good about what he had done. I wish in some way I could have this conversation with him. I would tell him that the girl he let go did not get caught later that day even with the disheveled clothes. And that she made it to Krakow, and that she survived the war. And that she married her high school sweetheart, and they made it to America. And that she had a good life, and that she was generous, and she helped many people, including Polish friends she met in America. And that she lived to be 94.

I can only hope he would tell me in return that that day in May of 1943 was as important to him as it was to us. That doing the right thing changed his life, and his family's lives, for the better.



My mom with her baby girl three years after the incident.



My mother around age 90 in her apartment in New York.